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ABSTRACT

Using data collected from 44 college faculty members, a study investigated the personality characteristics of writers, the ways in which highly productive writers differ from less productive ones, differences in writing strategies, and underlying motivations to write. The subjects were all male, tenured faculty members of a midwestern university who had published in any genre. They represented the major disciplines of humanities, social sciences, and physical sciences. For purposes of the study, productivity as a writer was quantified by converting self-report information on number and types of publications to a single numerical score. Based on these data, six subjects, three higher productive and three lower productive writers, were chosen for indepth interviews to further explore their underlying motivations and strategies. Data analysis yielded a number of conclusions, including the following: (1) writers seem to be characterized by high scores on achievement, endurance, and understanding, and low scores on play, impulsivity, and aggression; (2) dominance is significantly positively related and nurturance significantly negatively related to productivity as a writer; (3) an underlying motivation to write seemed to be a desire to achieve distinction; and (4) highly productive writers seemed to have an effective psychological writing strategy that emphasized productivity as well as creativity. (FL)

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MOTIVATIONAL PROCESSES AND PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES OF WRITERS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Large numbers of people attempt to write, at some time in their lives, either for personal expression or with aspirations to publish; however, little attention has been paid to the "motivation to write" in the psychology literature, including the specific factors associated with the initiation, direction and persistance of writing. Even within the burgeoning creativity literature, which one would expect to contain implications for the writing process, often attention has only been focused on identifying personality traits of those deemed "creative writers" by virtue of their achievements, as opposed to focusing on specific components of the creative process.

Writing, per se, involves a complex schema of unconscious (Freud), preconscious (Kubie, 1967) and conscious (cognitive) (McNiff, 1977) motivational processes. While the theoretical and empirical literature on writing is limited, both in quantity and quality, certain speculations have begun to emerge with some consistency. Writing appears to be motivated by a "discontent" (termed "tristimania"--a mania of sadness--by Edel, 1975), generally deriving from a need or conflict. This discontent seems to create a "tension" which in turn motivates the writing process. Writing thus not only provides an outlet for the tension, but appears to be an effort at coping, mastery, or self-realization, by providing a means of practice, problem-solving, or transformation of disturbing situations, particularly when other outlets are blocked. The coping response via writing may take a variety of forms and involve different motivations. It may involve effort at eliciting a response (i.e. communication, social recognition) (Hofling, 1963), or a stronger need to

influence or dominate others. Additional motivational factors, suspected to be related to creativity in general, and which likely have implications for writing, include need for achievement (Singh, et al., 1977), independence (as opposed to a coping style which requires affiliation with others), reward (ie. tenure), personal satisfaction, the need to earn a living, mortality, and emotional release (McNiff, 1977).

In the literature, there are numerous problems in the study of writing. Few studies have been conducted; people labeled as "creative writers" have been the objects of the research, and those studies that are available have limited methodologies. Just as we need to stop looking at the area of creativity, or even the more specific skill of writing as a uniform phenomenon, we must also begin to subcategorize various types of writers. Furthermore, thus far, focus on the product of the creative act has generally precluded focus on the processes used to write by different individuals.

The purpose of this exploratory study was to develop a profile of characteristics of writers, the writing process and successful writing strategies from which to determine significant variables and generate hypotheses for future research. College faculty were studied because they are a population that generally includes writing as part of their lives, and spans the various types of writing (ie. creative vs. scientific, books, articles). Using this relatively homogeneous population also aided in controlling for SES, education level, and other demographic characteristics. This study addressed the following questions:

(1) What are the personality characteristics of writers?

(2) How do Higher Productive Writers differ from Lower Productive Writers?

(3) How do writing strategies differ among writers?

(4) What are the underlying motivations-to-write?

METHODOLOGY

Subjects

Participants consisted of forty-four, tenured male University of Cincinnati faculty members randomly selected from the Arts and Sciences Publications Bulletins from the years 1978-1980. They were selected on the basis of having published as well as being representative of one of the major disciplines of Humanities, Social Sciences, or Physical Sciences.

Procedure

One hundred fourteen prospective participants were contracted by mail with a letter of introduction to the study. A follow-up phone call was made to solicit participation. Seventy-eight were reached by phone. A questionnaire packet, consisting of questions about the number and types of publications within the last three years and "Reasons for Writing" and the Personality Research Form was forwarded to the sixty-eight who agreed to participate. Forty-four returned the completed questionnaire packet.

For purposes of the study, "productivity-as-a-writer" (PW) was quantified. The self-report information on number and types of publications was converted to a single numerical score using a point system devised for this study. Based on this rating, six faculty members were then selected for in-depth interviews to further explore the underlying motivations and strategies of writers. Using a median split, three higher-productive

(HPW) and three lower-productive writers (LPW) were interviewed, including one of each from the three disciplines.

Results

Phase I of this study, the collection of quantifiable data, yielded the following results. Analysis of the Personality Research Form revealed this population to be high on the personality characteristics of Understanding, Achievement, and Endurance; low scores were found on the variables Aggression, Play, and Impulsivity. Analysis of the sample by discipline revealed no significant differences on any trait except Harmavoidance (avoidsrisk of physical harm) with the Physical Sciences Group being significantly lower than the Humanities group.

Correlations of personality traits with PW reveals Dominance to be significantly related to PW ($r = .316$). Nurturance was significantly negatively correlated ($r = .310$). A subsequent Multiple Regression analysis revealed Dominance to account for 9% of the Variance, and Nurturance for 6%.

Review of responses to the questionnaire asking for "Reasons for Writing" suggests that a high proportion of writers write to communicate, make a contribution, or impact on others. Beyond that, there do appear to be differences between HPW and LPW. HPW appear to derive more personal satisfaction and sense of accomplishment whereas LPW seem to write out of professional responsibility, or as a means to an end, ie) reputation or status.

Several themes emerged from Phase II of this study: The interviews. With regard to writing strategies, HPW seem to have developed psychological

as well as physical strategies which support both their creativity and productivity. LPW seem more susceptible to and hindered by obstacles to writing, ie) their own criticalness of their work. While all writers admitted to a certain degree of insecurity about themselves and for their work, writing seems to be a vehicle for self-confirmation as well as approval vis-a-vis the prospective audience. It provides an opportunity for enhancing one's identity and for influencing others, within a modality which enables the writer to "relate from a distance", thereby sidestepping the threat of more direct interaction with others.

Discussion

Discussion focuses on the meaning and measurement of productivity-as-a-writer, understanding the personality characteristics of writers, the differences between higher- and lower-productive writers, reasons and underlying motivations for writing, along with more general implications of this study for redefining the theoretical concept of "creativity". Results of this study were discussed within the context of integrating the findings from the two phases of the study. Limitations of the project are addressed and directions for future research suggested.

More specifically, findings from the PRF provide empirical support for previous studies on the personality characteristics of creative individuals, and for the theoretical literature on creativity. The significant positive correlation between "productivity-as-a-writer (PW) and "Dominance" supports Edel's notion of "megalomania" among writers. This is in contrast to the pervasive theme of insecurity and feeling like a loner or outsider, expressed by the interviewers. Evidence suggests writing is a vehicle for enhancing self-esteem, both vis-a-vis oneself and one's

perceived audience. While there appears to be a strong desire for a response from others, there is a low expressed need for affiliation within this group; writers seem to prefer a means of relating which is safe and at a distance, hence also bolstering their sense of independence. The significant negative correlation between PW and "Nurturance" sheds additional light on these findings, but also raises many questions about the relationship between PW and gender or developmental life-stage of writers.

Conclusions

1. Writers seem to be characterized by high scores on achievement, endurance, and understanding and low scores on play, impulsivity, and aggression (as measured by the PRF).
2. Dominance is significantly positively correlated with PW.
3. Nurturance is significantly negatively correlated with PW.
4. An underlying motivation-to-write seems to be a desire to achieve distinction--recognition for one's accomplishments--in a way which enhances identity and autonomy.
5. HPW seem to have an effective psychological writing strategy which emphasizes productivity as well as creativity.
6. HPW seem more intrinsically motivated by the desire to enhance self-esteem through writing as opposed to LPW who seem more extrinsically motivated by more tangible, "means-to-an-end" type of rewards.
7. In terms of theoretical viewpoints on creativity, it seems a merging of the two previously delineated perspectives are in order; while creativity might be motivated by a sense of dissatisfaction deriving from conflict, the act of writing seems to be in the service of coping, if not personal growth.

8. Future studies need to provide additional information:

   (a) Using a less restricted range of productivity in the sample of writers.

   (b) Using female as well as male writers.

   (c) Assessing additional personality traits such as self-esteem, level of neuroticism, identity.

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